

THE SCHOOL AND THE COMMUNITY

A Book of Short Stories



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John's First Home for the City's Forgotten

The Rebel Who Found Love

Jaya Thadani

IT WAS a hot summer's day in Portugal. A dusty child trudged along the road, a bundle on his shoulder, his jaw set firmly against the pain of his blistered feet. The loaf of bread he had stolen from his mother's larder was long since finished; and he looked around thirstily for a stream, or a friendly farmer who might give him a drink of milk. He hoped he would soon reach Spain. The child's name was John. He was 8 years' old and he was running away from home.

Home meant an ordinary Portuguese family. His parents lived by old customs. They went regularly to Church. They remembered feast days and fast days. And they insisted on obedience from children. Home meant an unchanging, unexciting life of daily routine and hard work. It meant all the things that a restless, high-spirited boy hated.

"I won't go back," he told himself, black eyes flashing. "I won't wash my face every morning. I won't go to Church. I won't be told I must learn a trade."

* * * * *

Twelve years later, tramping down a Spanish road, John found himself saying the same words.

"I won't go back !"

Once again his supply of coarse, rationed bread was finished and his wine-bottle empty. This time he was

leaving the Spanish army; and once again his high spirits and restlessness had made him a misfit and a rebel.

"I won't wear that foolish uniform. I won't be ordered into senseless fighting and senseless killing," he had declared to his rough, soldier companions. "I've had enough of this brutish way of life!"

Hearing him, they were all amazed. John had fought with them as mercilessly as they themselves. He had looted, drunk and gambled with the worst of them.

"Look at our John!" they cried, laughing at his sudden disgust at their way of life, "He's gone soft! He doesn't want a man's life any more! Perhaps he'll buy himself skirt and bonnet!"

John ignored them. He was thoroughly tired of wordly things, and tired of people who lived only for pleasure or for power.

He gave up soldiering and travelled many miles, often hungry and tired, looking for a way of life that would bring peace to his spirit. In a town called Granada, he finally decided to become a book-seller, selling religious books, which would improve men's souls and also earn him a living. With the same energy with which he had run away and fought and gambled and drunk, he now sold religious books. His zeal soon earned him a flourishing business.

So it might have remained. But the old restlessness crept into his heart again. One day, a famous preacher, a saintly man, came to Granada. Listening to him, John burst out weeping and began tearing his hair, while the crowd of other listeners looked on, shocked.

"I'm a useless, worldly creature!" he cried, "I am still living only for worldly profit!"

Wild-eyed and raving against himself, he ran home and began giving away his books and all his money.

"I will go to Africa," he decided, after giving away his

shop as well. "They say there are doctors there with medicines that bring peace to men's souls".

From that time onwards they called him "The Mad Book-Seller" and jeered at his ragged clothes, his unshorn hair and his half-crazed look. But one day the same saintly preacher heard of the mad book-seller and sent him a message :

"Stop punishing yourself", he told John, "and stop thinking only of your own problems. There are many around you who need help."

It was the turning point in John's life. In that moment of understanding he realised that his own problems would only be solved if he gave himself, heart and soul, to the problems of others. Turning his gaze outward for the first time in his life, John noticed the misery of others around him—the poor who lay in ditches, starving and homeless; the sick who screamed for help and died without medicine or care; the law-breakers who knew no better.

"How foolish I have been!" he cried, "How much time I have wasted on self-centred rebellion, when so many other fellow-beings needed my help!"

There had been three different Johns. The eight year-old who had run away from home; the twenty-year-old who refused to be regimented; and the book-seller who refused to be secure and respectable. Now all the three were finally full-grown, into a strong, free spirit, filled with love for others; giving all of itself to helping the weak.

Collecting a little money, John rented a shabby house and started his first home for the city's forgotten. He begged a bed from here, a blanket from there; and managed to make the rooms look something like hospital wards. Into them he packed the most miserable beggars he could find—fevered, coughing, covered with loathsome sores. All day he would look after them, cleaning their sores,

washing their filthy bodies. He would smile when he remembered his own dislike of washing his once-matted hair and dirty clothes. As he washed, swept, mended and tidied his patients and his hospital and himself, the rich ladies of Granada were impressed by the sight of this strong young man, who had given up the world, doing such humble tasks so cheerfully. They began to give him money and provisions for his work.

At night, John would search the city's parks and shelters, looking for his "treasures", as he called them—the poor, the sick and the dying; and also the thieves, the rogues, the murderers, who needed guidance and compassion; for he never forgot his own soldiering days, when he had sampled every vice himself.

The people who had called themselves his friends when he was a successful book-seller, kept well away from him.

"Poor creature!" they said, "see what he has sunk to—beggars and rogues whose lives are worth nothing anyway."

"He is mad," they still said, "or why would he act in this foolish way?"

In time, nevertheless, other young men, equally restless and weary of the world's values, joined John in his work. John had always hated orders and hated to obey rules. Now he found himself giving orders and making rules for his band of "nurses!" But there was no time for rebellion, no time to feel sorry for himself. His hospital grew, his helpers increased. And in the gratitude of the many who were cared for and comforted, John at least found peace.

At 55 years of age, he died, worn out and infected with the many diseases he had cheerfully treated.

"I am not sad," he said at the end, "but I wish I had not wasted so many years and done so little for others."

John lived in Spain, four hundred years ago; but his work is still carried on by the religious order that bears his name.

A Long Walk for Bisnu

Ruskin Bond

I HAD been in the hill-station a few days before I noticed a boy. On opening the cottage windows to the morning sun and the scent of pine-needles, I glimpsed a small figure toiling up the steep slope of the mountain. His clothes were old but clean, and he had a satchel slung over one shoulder.

'Namaskar,' he greeted me, as he looked up and saw me at the open window.

"Hullo," I said. "Where are you going?"

"To school."

"And where have you come from?"

He pointed back across the valley to the opposite mountain, where I could see a cluster of small houses and a pattern of terraced fields.

"My home is there," he said.

"It's very far."

"Five miles."

"Don't you get tired of walking all that distance?"

"I am used to it. And besides, I like walking".

At about four o'clock the same day I passed him on the road as he was setting out for home.

"And how was school today?" I asked.

"Our teacher was sick," he said. "So we didn't have much work. But there are tests next week. I must hurry now, or it will be dark before I reach home",



A Long Walk for Bisnu

His name was Bisnu, and I was to see him almost every day during my summer in the hills. Sometimes if he saw that I wasn't busy, just lazing in the garden, he would stop to ask me a question about what was happening in the world, or glance through my newspaper and ask about what he saw or read in it.

Sometimes, when he was on his way home, I would walk with him down the mountainside, as far as the little stream that tumbled down the ravine separating his hill from mine. Ferns and wild flowers grew near the stream, and when Bisnu discovered that I collected specimens of different wild flowers, pressing and mounting them in albums, and writing little notes about them, he would sometimes bring me a flower that was not so familiar—a cowslip or wild violet, saxifrage or wild geranium.

Once, in the month of June, when he did not appear for several days, I made the long walk to his village, and found him recovering from an illness. He was a little pale but otherwise cheerful, sitting on a string bed in the court-yard of his small house, reading a history book.

I met his people—his widowed mother, a tall, sturdy woman of about thirty-five, and his small sisters, Puja and Lakshmi. Together they made a living from three small terraced fields, growing potatoes, maize and barley. They also had a cow, a few goats, and several apricot trees.

It had been a warm day, and Bisnu's mother brought me a drink of curds to quench my thirst. The two small girls watched me with grave expressions, but broke into smiles when they found I was unable to finish the strong, sour curd.

Two days later Bisnu was going to school again, and he did not miss another day for as long as I was in the hill-station. Even during the rains, when the stream was swollen and the path often swept away by a landslide, Bisnu would

come trudging up the hill with a leaking umbrella and a pair of old gum-boots—the latter really to protect him from the leaches that bred so prolifically among the rotting oak-leaves in the damp of the forest.

When there was a panther scare in the district, I thought the boy would stay at home for safety; but, as he explained, it was not a man-eater but a cattle-lifter, and he wasn't afraid of cattle-lifters as they usually slunk off at the approach of a human. He was more afraid of bears, he said, because bears, being short-sighted, were unpredictable in their behaviour. But the bears came down to our hills only in the depths of winter (when food was scarce on the higher mountains) and at that time of the year the school was closed and Bisnu could stay at home.

Bisnu was ambitious. He said that when he left school he would like to study to be a doctor or an engineer; he would like to see something of the world. He would also like to start a school in the village, so that his sisters could study near home.

His mother would give him two thick *chapatis* and vegetable dish for his lunch, and this was all he would eat during the day except for wild strawberries and raspberries that he found on the way. He was always too shy to accept my offer of tea or lunch.

In the autumn, when I said I was going away, he seemed a little sad. Perhaps I had become a sort of landmark on his long walk to school. As an outsider I must have given a feeling of contact with the great world in which he hoped to move about one day. A village in the Himalayas is a lovely place to come back to; but Bisnu had to go away first.

"Will you come here again?" he asked.

"I hope so", I said, "I will try. How many years are left for you to finish school?"

"Four."

"Four years. If you walk ten miles a day for four years, how many miles does that make?"

"Fourteen thousand and six hundred miles", said Bisnu. "But there are about two months holiday every year. That means walking about twelve thousand miles in four years".

"It's a long walk to the end of school," I said.

"Oh, it's nothing," said Bisnu modestly. "I like walking."

The Secret

Mayah Balse

GOVIND sat on the doorstep of their hut, drawing patterns in the dust with a stick. Savitri's voice came to him loud and clear from the inside. "idle, good-for-nothing..." she accused, "All you do is eat and loaf around. Why don't you find some work? Must I slog all day while you take it easy? Where is the money to come from?"

Govind was seven years old. Savitri was his brother's wife. At his age, Govind did not think he could find a job. But he did not want to say so to Savitri because he was afraid she would beat him. Govind had lived with his brother ever since he was four years old and had got used to Savitri's blows.

He suffered the blows because he had nowhere else to go. His parents had died when he was quite young. He drew another pattern in the dust with his stick. The next minute, his sister-in-law was near him and he felt a sharp tweak of pain. Automatically, he began to cry. He wished his mother was alive. He wished he did not have to live with his brother Sadashiv in this hut. He wished he was rich like the people who had just come to live in the big house down the lane. They always wore silks and went about in cars. He was tired of Savitri's blows, disgusted with her talk of money.

He wandered down the lane crying softly. It was Holi. Children in the neighbourhood were splashing each other



Govind did not realise there was somebody in the room till he heard a voice.

with colour. But he had no money and could not buy any colour. Besides they were rich people's children and lived in the new block of flats opposite. They stared at him as he passed, commenting on his torn and dirty clothes, his bare feet. Seeing them enjoying themselves, Govind felt sorry for himself and began to cry more.

He walked towards the big house down the lane. He would have walked right past if he had not seen the wrist-watch on the table. The house had large windows with glass panes and the curtains were pulled right back to let in the light. He could see it quite clearly. It lay gleaming on the glass-topped black table.

Creeping up, he peeped inside. It shone goldlike, beckoning. There seemed to be no one about. He pushed against the window. It was open. This was going to be easy. There would be no need to break the glass. In a twinkling he had leapt up the window sill and jumped into the room.

Without looking around him, he grabbed the shining object. He would sell it in the bazaar and get the money he needed. Mentally he decided how he would use it. He would buy colour with half and some *mithai* as well. The other half he would give to Savitri. Perhaps after that, she would not shout at him any more.

He was so intent on the thoughts that he did not realise there was somebody in the room till he heard the voice. "Hello" said a boy, and Govind stepped short, frightened, "What are you doing?"

Govind turned round slowly, clutching the watch in his moist fist. It was then that he saw the figure on the chair. The boy was a little bigger than him and looked at him with large sad eyes.

Govind was caught. He had an immediate vision of a blue-clad policeman marching him off hand-cuffed and another one of an angry Savitri raining blows on his head. He turned

quickly, all prepared to jump over the window to safety. But the boy said : "Wait. Don't go. What's your name?"

"Govind". It came out before he could think. Then he was scared. All was lost. The rich boy would now call the police. He even had his name. He should never have given it. He should have turned and run away.

The stolen wrist-watch felt large and awkward in his wet fist. He stood where he was, staring at the boy in the chair.

Govind wondered why the boy did not get up and grab him. He was much bigger than Govind and looked strong too. Govind was jealous of him. He was rich. He could buy as many colours as he wished and play Holi with the other kids. He could walk in a carpeted room and eat good food. It was so unfair.

"I hate you", said Govind suddenly, "I hate people like you. You do not know what it is to be beaten, to have no money, to eat dry *roti*. You have everything, don't you? Everything you could desire! God has been kind to you. And now just because I have taken one silly wrist-watch, you will hand me over to the police".

Govind expected the worst. He would be beaten for his insolence. But he did not mind it. At last he had said what he felt to someone. After all these months of silent suffering he had finally uttered his deepest thoughts and it felt good.

But he was unprepared for what followed. The boy in the chair looked at him and began to cry. His fair hands went to his face and he sobbed. The expensive new clothes looked odd on a boy who wept. Govind felt strange. It was all very unreal. What was happening ?

The next minute the door opened and a woman entered the room. She was very beautiful. She wore a bright yellow

saree with some jari on it and brand new slippers. Her nails and lips were painted bright red. When she saw the boy in the chair, her face changed.

"Why, Jagdish," she exclaimed, "what is the matter? Why are you crying?"

Then she looked at Govind, standing by the window and clutching the gold wrist-watch. She gave a little scream and her hands flew to her throat. "It's a thief," she cried, "Bahadur, ayah. Where are you?" She hugged Jagdish. "My poor boy, my child," she said. "Did the nasty thief hurt you? Is that why you are crying? Just you wait. I will ring up the police at once and they will beat him and lock him up". She looked towards Govind in a scared way, half expecting him to murder her on the spot. Lifting up Jagdish in her arms, she carried him to a far corner of the room, shouting hoarsely through the curtained doorway for the servants.

Govind saw for the first time that Jagdish was a cripple. That explained why he had not got up and grabbed him, when he took the watch. Govind felt sorry for the boy and wished he had not spoken those cruel words and made him cry. Govind did not mind going to the police station now. In fact he felt he deserved it. All this time he should have been happy he had legs to run about and play and see people merry-making in the streets, while he had been sunk in self-pity, disgusted with his poverty.

The crowd of children Govind had seen were going down the road now. A blind beggar passed that way. And Govind suddenly felt thankful, he had eyes to see the colour. The woman in the yellow saree was pacifying her son, and the boy had stopped crying.

"Don't worry Amma," Govind heard him say, "He did not steal the watch. I gave it to him. He's my friend".

Govind put the wrist-watch back on the table. He did not

need money now. Not any more. He had found something far more precious, the secret of contentment. All the money in the world could not buy it.

And he had found a friend too.

New Friends

Neila D'Souza

RAVI always ran from the gate up the short path to the house. He never walked. And today he was specially excited.

"School's over, Amma," he called as he burst into the house. "Holidays from today!" and he dropped his bag on his desk with glee on his way to the kitchen where his mother was busy pouring out a glass of milk for him.

"School's over, Amma," he repeated. "Am I glad! No more sums, no more homework. I can play cricket and football and read and sort out my stamps ." The words came tumbling out between gulps of milk. "And here's my report."

Mother glanced at it; then looked at him with a question in her eye.

"Amma, my marks in Maths are terrible, I know. But really, Arithmetic is quite impossible. I hate sums—area sums, over and over again. It's so boring."

"But son, it's important, isn't it. You must do well in Arithmetic—you'll need it for college later on."

"Oh, I wish I could drop it. I never seem to do well in it."

"Never mind, Ravi. We'll talk about it later when Father is home."

After a wash and change, Ravi strolled out into the garden. Just now the grass was parched and dry; it always got like that before the rains, even though Ravi and his father spared

as much water as they could for the garden. The rockery looked good though. It was Ravi's idea to make one under the tamarind tree. The tree stood right at the corner of the compound, its branches spreading over the little fence and shading the other side so that the workmen often sat there in the afternoons, resting or eating dry, folded *chapatis* from their tins. Ravi stood at the fence, watching the men at work.

A house, even a small one like this, seemed to take a lot of buildings! It was now the end of April and they had started—when was it? The beginning of December, just before the terminal exams. All that digging and laying of foundations. And the house was still incomplete.

The man was there too, supervising the unloading of a truckload of cement. He was young and had bright eyes and a ready smile. Just then he turned round and caught sight of Ravi under the tree.

"I think I'll join you there for a few minutes," he called out. "It's so hot in the sun", and he walked up to the fence, mopping his forehead. "You are home early today, aren't you?"

"We had a half-day today being the last day of the school," Ravi explained.

"So now you have your holidays! Lucky chap," smiled the young man. "What's your name?"

"Ravi. Ravi Gopalan. What are you doing today at your building?"

"Checking the cement and paying the weekly wages. You want to come along? My name is Tony, by the way."

Ravi nodded and went round the fence to join his new friend. Tony showed Ravi how the building was coming up. They had to walk on planks across spaces where the walls hadn't yet come up and where steps would be built. Tony explained that he was a junior architect, supervising

the building. He had designed the house and was looking after the construction too, and since this was his very first house he was quite excited.

"Seems a lot of work", Ravi commented.

"But it's fun—I enjoy it!" exclaimed Tony. "You know what? Tomorrow I'll bring the plan and show it to you."

The next day Tony brought the plan and pointed out several interesting details to Ravi. "This is what we do first—plan out the house on paper, depending, of course, on how much money we have and the area of the plot. Then starts the actual work. The foundation is dug; cement and steel ordered, later the bricks. Frames for doors and windows, tiling for the floors, bathroom fittings, electricity arrangements and so on."

"But how do you calculate all that?" Ravi asked. "It seems very complicated."

"Here, I'll show you," said Tony. "Suppose you have Rs. 30,000 for the house. You want two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, two bathrooms, and a verandah. You have a plot of about 2,000 sq. ft. Let's draw a rough plan."

As Ravi watched Tony and listened to him, it all seemed quite simple and interesting. Tony showed Ravi how to plan for the best use of sunlight and fresh air without wasting space. Under his fingers a house took shape on the paper. Tony marked space for a garden and a verandah next to the bedroom which could be used for breakfast too. He divided the Rs. 30,000 into so much for steel and cement, for bricks, for wages for the workmen, for bathroom fittings and electrical connections. Ravi marvelled secretly. How good Tony was at figures!

"So there you are", said Tony as he finished. Ravi looked at the drawing.

"That would be a nice house to live in", he said admiringly. "I could have the bedroom at the back, the quiet one .."

"Making plans already!" laughed Tony. "Well, I must go back to the office. See you tomorrow...". And he jumped on his scooter that he always left in the shade of the tamarind tree and went in a fine splutter.

Ravi walked home slowly, looking at the plan Tony had just drawn. Mother was busy in the kitchen, so Ravi sat down in the verandah to study the plan. That was a clever way to fit the bathroom. And the big bedroom would be very airy with windows on three sides. A thought struck Ravi, so he fetched a pencil and rough notebook and settled back in the chair.

"What are you busy with, Ravi", Father called out. Ravi started. It must be past six, if Father was back. And he hadn't even noticed!

"What's all this?", Father asked again as he stood near Ravi, looking at his scribbles in the notebook.

"Tony, that's the chap building the house next door, drew a plan to show me. Look, there it is. And I suddenly had an idea. If this wall is moved slightly here, the living-room could be made larger, and it would not make any difference to the cost. I have worked that out. And then, a small wall about 3 ft. high could be put along here, to separate the dining room part. The wall could be for decorations but the part facing the dining table could have shelves for plates and things".

"Hm-m," said Father, studying the plan. "Of course, if you moved the wall, the bedroom would get a bit smaller but it's still 14 ft. by 12ft. Quite comfortable. The wall in the dining room is a good idea. Whose is it?"

"Mine", beamed Ravi. "And if you don't want shelves on the dining room side, there could be shelves on the other side for books."

"Hey, hold on. Who is building a house?" Father laughed. "Come on son, let's go inside. I want a cup of tea."

The next day Ravi waited impatiently for Tony to come so that he could show him his ideas. Tony was quite surprised. "Listen," he said. "Ask your mother and come to my office with me. I'll show you some other plans there and you can help me with some calculations."

The holidays went by quickly, for Ravi kept very busy with Tony. Once or twice a week he went to Tony's office where he looked through books on architecture or helped Tony with designs. After Tony got back from church on Sundays, they played cricket. Tony was a fine bowler and soon became popular with Ravi's friends.

It was Mother who brought up the subject quite by chance on the day before school opened. "You know, we haven't discussed your Maths at all. You said something at the beginning of the holidays about dropping it. Don't you want to talk to Father about it?"

"No need for that," Ravi said cheerfully. "I'm going to be an architect—like Tony. I must do Maths for architecture. Besides, Arithmetic isn't dull really. Tony has promised to help me if I want."

Mother smiled to herself as Ravi went off with his cricket bat.

The School Picnic

Jaya Thadani

MOHINI's class was going for a picnic. She looked out of the bus window at the old, crumbling houses and shops that bordered the road in Daryaganj. They reminded her of the untidy line her class always formed when the P. T. Teacher asked them to form a straight one. Above the roar of the bus, as it rattled along to Lodi Gardens, she said to her friend Sheila who sat beside her, "Would'nt Miss Sood be cross with these houses for making such a crooked line!" Sheila turned her round, bespectacled face to look at the houses. She was a solid, practical girl, drawn to Mohini by the latter's high spirits, just as Mohini was drawn by Sheila's quiet dependability.

"How could she be cross?," she said flatly, "They're houses, not people."

Mohini sighed. Sheila often irritated her with her inability to make-believe. But, as Mohini told herself, she was a good friend and could nearly always be persuaded to fall in with her friend's impulsive plans. She turned to more practical matters.

"What do you think they've packed for our lunch?," she asked.

"Aloo Parathas and a vegetable and a banana each," replied Sheila promptly. "I heard them ordering it. I hope there'll be enough for forty of us!"



"Quick!", Mohini suddenly whispered, grabbing her friend's arm,

"How dull!" Mohini pouted, "I wish there were interesting pickles and sweets. And I do hope we can buy peanuts or icecream or something.....Look !" she whispered, "I've bagged a rupee from Papa, and I have a rupee of my own....." Sheila interrupted her solemnly, "I have some change too, but there won't be anything worth buying in the park and we aren't allowed to go outside the gates, Miss told us before we started. It's a Picnic Rule".

The bus was stopping at the gates of the park. The girls poured out in their blue and white uniforms, looking like a flock of budgerigars. Miss Das, rather harassed and shrill, gave them instructions.

"You may walk around the gardens in groups of ten, but don't go outside: and collect on this lawn for lunch, in one hour from now."

The hampers were unloaded and Miss Das settled down beside the picnic fare, to knit away the time. ("Like a lioness guarding the treasure!", whispered Mohini, which started a giggle among the girls, making Miss Das frown suspiciously at them.) Some of her favourites clustered round her on the grass. Others broke into groups and wandered off to look at the Lodi Tombs. An energetic party started a ball game.

"Quick!", Mohini suddenly whispered, grabbing her friend's arm, "Quick, before we're seen!". She flashed like a sprite behind an old broken wall and dragged her bewildered friend along with her.

"Wh-where are we g-going?", Sheila stammered nervously.

"To Khan market, which is just outside the park and for more exciting than these silly old tombs!" replied Mohini, already gliding away, out of Miss Das's sight.

"It's against the Picnic Rules!", protested Sheila half-heartedly, going along with Mohini all the same. She

knew she could never resist Mohini's sudden and outrageous plans for adventure. They were so unlike her own dull notion of living. "Oh, come ON !" cried Mohini, "who will know where we went ? Each lot will think we're with another and we'll be back well in time for lunch!"

Sheila said no more. As usual, Mohini's charm had won her over; and breaking rules seemed to be heroic and worthwhile.

"I know the market well. We shop there on holidays," Mohini was saying, a little breathless with running. "And lots of students go there", she added, trying to sound causal, "Young fellows, from that college near by, you know."

Sheila blushed. Mohini's interest in boys was a recent one, dating from the summer holidays. She had come back to school much more grown-up. And Sheila, although secretly fascinated, had expressed stern disapproval. She had even ridiculed her friend's absorption in film stars, in romantic notions of eloping with a handsome prince, in the admiring glances she was given whenever they went out.

In three or four minutes they were in Khan Market, Mohini clutching her money and both fluttering with the excitement of doing something forbidden. "Oh look ! Bangles !", Mohini cried as they were wandering in the depths of the market.

"We can't buy anything!", Sheila hissed at her. "Where would we hide it ? Miss would see it at once."

"True," Mohini agreed reluctantly. She walked along disappointedly for a bit and then brightened.

"She won't see inside us, anyway", she laughed. "We'll just EAT two rupees worth of delicious things! Come on! The eating places are more interesting anyway !"

As they neared the food-vendor's stalls, a group of noisy college boys were eating 'gol guppas'. The arrival of the two girls first embarrassed them into silence : then, to hide

their awkwardness, they started to smirk and murmur over the new-comers. One of them burst into a love-song from a current film.

"You KNEW they'd be here!", Sheila said accusingly to her friend, her ears burning. Mohini coolly ordered two plates of 'chaat' and nudged Sheila to be quiet.

"Why are you such a spoil-sport?", she whispered, "Look at that one who's staring at us—Does'nt he look like Dev Anand?"

Sheila could only stare at her plate of 'chaat,' not daring to raise her eyes.

"NICE girls? Whoever said they were nice girls?" giggled another.

"Oh well, in that case they won't mind a little fun!", laughed a third, coming near Mohini with the excuse of putting down his plate.

It seemed to Mohini, that the day had suddenly lost its sparkle. This wasn't at all the sort of gay adventure she had hoped for; it made her feel cheap and miserable. The fire-sharp potato she was eating was like mud in her mouth and the fizzy drink tasted bitter. Sheila too was plunged in an agony of conscience and disgust.

"I don't want to stay here", she whispered to Mohini, her eyes filling.

Mohini, inwardly relieved to have a reason for ending the adventure, looked at her friend with a superior calm she did not feel.

"Oh, all right, silly," she said, "Let's go".

As a last act of defiance she bought some sticky pink sweets and the two girls moved off, sucking their sweets and acutely aware of the whistles and calls that followed them.

The rest of the party was gathering around the hampers when Mohini and Sheila arrived at the park. Unnoticed,

they slipped in amongst the others and tried to look as care-free and hungry as they. Sheila, troubled equally within by her conscience and by the hastily-gobbled spices, shuddered and refused her share of lunch.

"What? Not even the marvellous 'halwa' Miss has made for us?", a classmate asked in astonishment.

"Try some of my grandmother's mango pickle," said another, "She made me bring it along to eat at the picnic."

Neither of the girls could do more than toy with a raw carrot. Their heads were aching, the 'chaat' had scalded their stomachs, and, worst of all, was the gnawing memory that they had been labelled "Not nice girls" by a bunch of gallants that they had hoped to impress. To add to their uneasiness, Miss Das seemed to be looking at them in a very knowing way.

"Selfish irresponsibility," she said suddenly to the assembly, "sometimes seems very brave and romantic."

Mohini and Sheila stared at the grass in misery. Around them the sun shone and the girls chattered happily about their morning's games and explorings in the park, as they hungrily devoured the good things in the hampers. Mohini and Sheila could only sit silent, unable to share anything.

"After all that the school did to give us a good time, we behaved pretty badly" Sheila muttered, as the bus rocked homewards. "Why do I let you lead me into doing foolish things?"

"They don't appear to be foolish in the beginning," "Mohini murmured ruefully. "If only I could see the end of my schemes, I'd drop them, but they seem so brilliant at the time!"

They sat, thinking of the lean weeks ahead, their pocket-money all spent. The bad taste in their mouths was not just the 'chaat' and pink sweets. Behind them lay the holiday, nearly over and sadly soiled,

Rubies from the Air

Mir Najabat Ali

PARTHASARATHY and Basheer were classmates at the Medical College at Madras. They were great friends, as they had been classmates ever since they first joined the Mission School in their home-town. They had also been neighbours and had often studied and played together.

Unfortunately, Parthasarathy's father died a couple of years after the boy joined the Medical College. He had no money to continue his studies, but Basheer helped him. He got round his father to increase his allowance. Living cheaply and sharing things, the two boys managed to get their Degree.

Basheer's father arranged to send his son to England for his F.R.C.S. Parthasarathy saw his friend off.

"What are you going to do after this, Parthy?", asked Basheer.

"I'll accept the first job I can get."

"Then you save as much money as you can and come over to England while I am there. Between us, we could manage cheaply as we have done so far".

"I'll think it over, " said Parthasarathy.

"What do you mean ? Have you any other plans?"

"Not yet. But I've always wanted to help the poor and the helpless. There seem to be plenty of them here".

"You've always had these ideas. Don't you think you'd be able to earn more money and do more good as an F.R.C.S. than as a plain M.B.B.S."



Patients came to him for consultation and treatment. He charged full fee to the wealthy patients but to the poor, his treatment was always free.

"It is not quite as simple as that, Basheer. The point is to start as soon as you get the chance. If you put it off, you may not get another one for years. Money, I feel, is not the only thing."

"Nonsense! I'll expect you to come over in about a year's time. You should be able to save enough by then."

"Anyway, we'll be writing to each other. I'll let you know how things shape out".

"Do."

They embraced one another and parted.

Parthasarathy was posted as an Assistant at the Government Hospital at M———m. This was a few years before World War II, when the British still ruled India. Parthasarathy worked very hard to look after his patients.

But he was not happy. The supply of medicines at the hospital was very poor. Most of his patients, many of them Muslims, were too poor to buy medicines from the market. They could hardly afford to buy food; and the prices of medicines and the cost of living were rising fast. Telling a patient to buy medicines from the market was the same as asking him to go home and die. Parthasarathy felt like a man whose hands were tied down. He wanted to do so much; but how could he do it?

Day and night, he kept thinking of some way out. He thought of what Basheer had said. If he went to England, he could earn more and possibly do more good when he got back. But how could he go away when people were dying all around him? He must do something here and at once to save those lives.

One night an idea came to him. He would learn homoeopathy. Homoeopathic medicines were very cheap. Even with his own money he could buy them and give them free to his patients. At least, no one would be sent away without treatment.

Once he had got the idea, he worked hard at it. Within a few months he had obtained a diploma by postal tuition, that permitted him to practise homoeopathy.

During working hours at the hospital, he practised only surgery and allopathy. But if there were any patients whom he could not treat there, he directed them to see him at his house after working hours. There he gave them homoeopathic medicines free of charge. The number of these patients rose till hundreds flocked to him every evening. No doctor ever had such a rush of patients.

Parthasarathy found that his knowledge of the two sciences, allopathy and homoeopathy, was a great help. Some diseases yielded readily to allopathic treatment, while others to homoeopathic treatment.

His posting at M————m lasted for twelve years. Before he left the place, he had become famous as one of the best homoeopaths in the country. Patients came to him from all over the country or called him for consultation. He charged full fee to his wealthy patients and there were many of them. But, to the poor, his treatment was always free.

Basheer returned from England in due course and established a flourishing practice at Madras. They were still great friends and saw one another when they got the chance.

One night, they were together in Basheer's house at Madras.

"I suppose," asked Basheer, "you still work hard trying to do good in that stuffy hole of a place?"

"It is not quite so stuffy now", replied Parthasarathy with a smile. "Patients come to me from all over South India. A few come from North India, too."

"It is good to hear that, Parthy. And what about the wolf at the door? Is it still there?"

"You know, Basheer, I never bother much about how much I am saving. Only the other day, I looked up my bank balance. It wasn't so bad, after all".

"How much was it ?" asked Basheer as an old and privileged friend.

Parthasarathy named the figure.

"Why, Parthy," cried Basheer jumping up, "It is more than double of what I have been able to save. I don't think any of our other colleagues have done so well."

"I don't know. Honestly, I've never thought about it."

"This reminds me", said Basheer, "of the poet who said",

'Let him who gives without a care
Gather rubies from the air.'

"It looks as if you have been doing it all these years."

(The story narrated above is true. Only the names and a few facts have been changed to prevent the characters from being recognized.)

The Green Years

Mayah Balse

SHASHIKALA remembered the day very well, when her father came home from office with a large brown parcel under his arm and said : "I've got a surprise for both of you." The "both" included her sister Sundari, a fair, tall girl who was always smiling cheerfully at everybody. She was twelve years old. Shashikala, just six, was a thin, dark child with a narrow face and sad hollow eyes. Many people remarked : "The sisters are so different. Like day and night. They don't look like sisters." On these occasions, Shashikala grew sadder still and Sundari's proud smiles enlarged.

Their father, Manohar, undid the rustling paper and the two girls gasped at the lovely new clothes within. There was a beautiful pink *salvar kameez* outfit with a matching *dupatta* for Sundari and a lovely cream coloured frock with lace on the pockets and collar, for her sister.

Sundari laughed delightedly and went off to try on the new clothes. But Shashikala just stood by quietly, gripping the new frock in her hands. When Manohar tried to take off her old frock, she stepped back and shook her head. "What's the matter, Shashi. Don't you want to try on your new dress? Don't you like it?", he asked.

"No, I wanted a *salvar kameez*, too." She did not like him call her, Shashi. It made her seem like a boy. She hated it.

"But you're young, child. When you grow up I'll get

you one." But Shashikala was thinking to herself : "He got a *salvar kameez* for Sundari because she is beautiful. He didn't get one for me because I am ugly. Besides, I wanted pink clothes," she said, "Sundari has pink clothes." She stood there and looked defiantly at her father. "You're such a difficult child," said Manohar losing his patience, "any other girl would have been so happy to get a new dress. There are not many children who are so lucky. There are some who dress in rags because they cannot afford anything better. And you cry and sulk. I didn't get a pink one for you because it wouldn't suit you. Cream will make you look so nice."

Sundari had dressed and come into the room in her pink outfit, looking quite gorgeous. She said : "Shashi, can't you see? Baba bought pink for me because I'm fair. Pink suits fair people. You're much too dark to wear pink". Shashikala began to cry. She hated them both. She wanted her mother. But their mother was dead and would never come back. She had died when Shashikala was four years' old.

"Stop crying Shashi," said Manohar, "and listen to me, both of you. You're going to have a mother soon." "Mother?" said Shashikala dully, and almost forgot her tears. For she thought Baba was going to bring their Ayee back from wherever she had gone.

Then he said : "A new mother."

Sundari asked : "Is she coming here today?"

But Shashikala said: "I don't want a new mother. I want the same old one". And she began to cry again. Manohar lifted her up and wiped her tears, making her sit on his lap.

"I can't bring back your old mother, child. Please try to understand. She has gone to God".

"Then take her back from God," said Sashikala unreasonably. Manohar looked somewhere into the distance, then

at his two daughters and said : "Your new mother is very nice. You will like her too. I bought you those lovely clothes because we are all going out together this evening—the three of us and her."

"I don't want to go out," shouted Shashikala.

"I hate my new frock. And I hate my new mother. I don't want to see her."

"Do what you want," said Manohar abruptly, putting her down roughly on the floor. "It is impossible to reason with such a stubborn and difficult child." And Shashikala shed a fresh torrent of tears.

They went away, the three of them, leaving her with the old servant woman, Kaveri.

Shashikala squatted on the kitchen doorstep in the same old frock and talked to Kaveri. She was her only confidant. In a fit of rage, the child had stuffed the cream-coloured dress in the garbage can at the back of the house. She did not want to see it.

"Why must he bring a new mother," she complained to Kaveri. "Doesn't he have Sundari and me? Why should he bring a third person whom we don't want. I asked Sundari later if she was keen on a new mother and she said she did not want one particularly. But she is smiling to please Baba."

"He is marrying this woman because he loves her, my child."

"But doesn't he love Sundari and me? I know he loves Sundari more than me. He is always saying nice things about her. But still, I can't understand why he wants to bring in this absolute outsider."

"You will understand when you grow up, my child. Understand what love is. A different kind of love."

"I can't see how he can love her. She doesn't belong to us. She is not one of us."

"She will be coming to live here soon, dear."

"Then I shan't talk to her. Or if I have to, then I won't

call her 'aunty' like Sundari does. I will call her Vimla."

They all trooped in a couple of hours later and the first thing that Sundari said was : "We had ice-cream at the beach and there was a man with performing monkeys, who was just great." Shashikala tried not to feel jealous but she couldn't help it. She adored ice-cream and whenever she heard the tlop-tlop of the monkey-man's drums she always ran to watch. She hated her new mother for making her miss both these pleasures. If only Sundari and Baba had gone to the beach, she would have gone along too.

"Will you have a sweet?" Vimla said, going up to Shashikala and offering her one from a cellophane packet she had bought.

"No thank you, Vimla," said Shashikala, though she just loved sweets. This woman was trying to make friends with her and she was not going to be tempted. She would let her know that she was unwelcome. Then perhaps she would go away forever.

Manohar said curtly : "Shashi, didn't I tell you to call your new mother 'aunty'?"

Shashikala made a face.

And Baba said : "Let's leave her alone. It is impossible to please her and she is so disobedient. Quite the opposite of her sister. Sundari is a sweet child, easy to deal with. She always listens to me." Sundari smiled at him, quite pleased with herself.

Then one day, Manohar's purse was stolen. He had just got his pay; so there was quite a hue and cry about it. He suspected the servant at once and began to brow-beat her into a confession of guilt. But she wept and pleaded that she was innocent. He believed her because she had been with the family for many years.

He could not understand who had taken it. Vimla suggested : "Perhaps it was an outsider. Your door is often



Shashikala carried her school bag and it seemed stuffed with a couple of frocks which peeped out from the sides in a suspicious way. In her right hand was Manohar's missing purse.

open because the children are always running outside to play. Someone might have walked in and taken it." "It is possible of course," said Manohar, "but I doubt it. An outsider would not know the exact place where I keep it. And even if he tried to hunt for it he would run the risk of being seen by the children outside."

The theft remained a mystery.

The next day, Vimla was going down the main road when she saw a strange sight. Shashikala was walking a little ahead. She carried her school bag though it was now the vacation and it seemed stuffed with a couple of frocks which peeped out from the sides in a suspicious way. The bag was slung across her shoulder and she was singing to herself. In her right hand was Manohar's missing purse.

Vimla caught up with her. When she saw her, the child gave a start and tried to escape but Vimla held her free hand. Shashikala whipped the purse out of sight behind her back.

"Let me go, you awful woman," said the girl, in tears now from sheer desperation.

"You took the purse didn't you?" asked Vimla softly.

"Yes."

"And why did you take it, Kala?"

The name struck a pleasant chord. Her mother had called her Kala too. She liked the name. She liked it much better than Shashi. "I took it because I wanted to run away," said the girl wiping away her tears with the back of her sleeve. "I had heard father say once that you needed money to live. So I had to take his money." There was something about Vimla's soft, kind voice that made her want to confess the truth. "That was a silly thing to do," said Vimla. "You're young. Where would you have gone?"

"Anywhere. With money you can get along anywhere," she declared like a woman of the world. "I heard father say that once too."

Vimla laughed: "And how long did you think you could exist on that money?"

"Why? All my life. It's an awful lot of money." She pulled some notes out of the wallet and showed her.

"It's not. It's just five hundred rupees".

"Isn't that an awful lot of money?"

"No dear. It gets finished very soon. It would have been terrible if you had really run away. Don't you know your father would have been sick with worry?"

"Not he!", said the girl, "he doesn't love me. He loves Sundari and you."

"Don't say that. He loves you a lot."

"No", said Shashikala and began to sob.

"Don't cry, Kala. Come home with me."

For a moment Shashikala was afraid Vimla was taking her to Baba; and when he learnt the truth he would surely beat her and lock her up in the bathroom.

"No", she protested, "Baba will be wild with me."

"I'm not taking you there, my darling," soothed Vimla, and took the girl's small thin hand in her own, "Come." Shashikala followed her like a puppet.

They got on a double decker bus and rattled away for forty-five minutes till they came to a large junction of roads. Getting off there, they walked a short distance till they came to a row of flats.

"Where have we come?"

"This is where I stay," said Vimla and led her up the wooden steps to the first floor. The small door was locked and Vimla opened it to reveal a tiny room. Shashikala stepped inside and looked around. It was a tidy room but there were no people about.

"Where's everyone?", asked Shashikala.

"There's no one else here, Kala, I live alone,"

"Your mother?"

"She's gone. Just like yours. And she'll never come back."

Shashikala knew a curious kinship. They had something in common and this bond seemed to link them.

"My father has gone too," said Vimla, and the girl felt doubly sorry for her. At least she had her Baba. "And my brothers and sisters are all married. So I live alone and work in a bank."

"Sundari and I have Baba," she said, "you can come and share him with us".

"Thank you, Kala," said Vimla, making the girl feel generous.

Then they sat down on the single *navar* cot and ate some *gulab jamuns* that Vimla had made that morning. Shashikala was enjoying herself but she was still frightened of one thing.

"Will you tell Baba I tried to run away from home?"

"No "

"Will you tell him I took the purse?"

Vimla looked at her and then took both her hands in her own.

"I won't tell him," she said, "I will put it back." Shashikala could not believe her ears.

"Thank you so much," she said, "you're just wonderful." And she threw both her arms round Vimla's neck and hugged her.

"Kala," said Vimla, kissing the thin dark face, "you must promise two things. Never run away. And never steal again. Even if it is from your own house. It is wrong."

"Oh yes, yes, I promise".

"And now eat those *gulab jamuns*," Vimla told her, "and then we'll go and buy you a pink *salvar-kameez* outfit."

That evening Baba said: "Vimla, do you know? The purse was in quite another place. It was in the pocket of my blue pair of trousers. It was there all the time and I

never even looked. I thought it was in the pocket of my black trousers. Perhaps I was mistaken. I'm so relieved to have found it and feel a real fool for making a hullabaloo about nothing." Vimla and Shashikala exchanged glances. The mystery of the missing purse was their own special secret and no one would ever know about it.

Manohar then noticed Shashikala's new pink outfit and whistled in surprise "Hello ! Who got that for you ?" "I did," said Vimla, smiling at the radiant girl. "Doesn't she look lovely in it?" "Delightful. But I had no idea." Manohar was nonplussed. And because her father had paid her a special compliment, Shashikala felt more beautiful than her sister.

Vimla said. "Kala and I took a ride in a double-decker bus today. We went to my room and ate *gulab jamuns*."

Manohar looked at Shashikala in surprise.

Sundari said: "Don't call her Kala, aunty. Her name is Shashikala and we call her Shashi." But Shashikala retorted. "She calls me Kala because she likes me. I love the name. My old mother used to call me Kala too. And don't call our mother 'aunty', Sundari. Call her Ayee, I'am going to call her Ayee, too.

The Loss

Jehanara Wasi

THE EIGHTH standard at Tara Hall disliked Miss Hasan. She was, they had made up their minds, dull, unexciting. You'd think that because she taught English Composition, her classes would be interesting. On the contrary, Miss Hasan was given to setting the most boring essays that would put anyone to sleep before they were even halfway through.

The eighth standard were a bright lot. "Why, oh why" sighed Sunita, a real live wire, to her mother, "must she give us the same old compositions to write? If it's not an essay on 'A Day at the Zoo' or 'What I'd like to be when I grow up', it's something just as dreary." Her mother nodded sympathetically.

The class agreed with Sunita. Take Miss Kumar or even Miss Edwardes. They were both vivacious and interesting. In their classes you never had a dull moment. They laughed and chatted with the girls outside class, took them on excursions and generally joined in the teenage fun and games. But Miss Hasan had a way of dampening any fifteen-year old's spirits. She'd come into the class with a long, dour face, hair pulled tightly back and a heavily patterned sari, proclaiming her absence of taste.

"She has no style", complained fashion-conscious Zhora. "Why can't she look presentable or even reasonably nice? Nobody's asking her to copy *Vogue*", she giggled.

After she had entered the classroom, Miss Hasan would

take the attendance and then set the class an essay. She never bothered to discuss the topic before she put it down on the blackboard. "Now, girls," she would say in her querulous, high-pitched voice, "I expect you to work independently and in silence. After you have finished writing, you will kindly hand your work in for correction."

And so the ritual dragged monotonously on from day to day.

One day, however, the eighth standard had a surprise. It was Wednesday and Miss Hasan took them for English Composition in the third period at 12 o'clock. She was usually on time but today she arrived twenty minutes late. She came in looking flustered and disturbed. Her eyes were red; she had evidently been crying. Her hair and clothes were in a state of disarray. The eighth standard had never seen Miss Hasan like this. They looked at one another, puzzled.



*"I want you to write me an essay on 'The worst thing that ever happened to me',"
said Miss Hasan with a break in her voice,*

"I want you to write me an essay on 'The Worst Thing that ever Happened to Me'," she said with a break in her voice. This was unusual for Miss Hasan but there was more to come. "Put some feeling into your writing, make your experiences live", she said. And with that she left the classroom as hurriedly as she had entered.

There was an excited buzz of comment as soon as she had gone. Only one girl was left wondering, a rather sad girl.

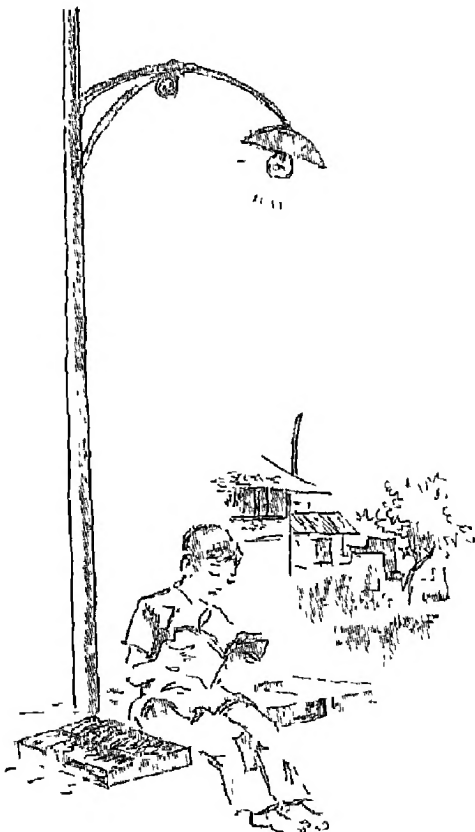
For the next four days, the eighth standard saw nothing of Miss Hasan. Other teachers came in periodically to see how things were going, but otherwise the girls were left to their own devices.

Then, the following Monday, Miss Hasan arrived with a pile of exercise books. She looked very pale and drawn. Everyone looked at her curiously. Where had Miss Hasan been all this time?

"Girls", she said in her high falsetto, "I found most of your essays interesting, but one in particular, I read over and over again". She turned to look at Nirmala, the girl with the sad face. Nirmala was a thoughtful, quiet girl, mature for her fifteen years.

"Nirmala, my dear", she began, and everybody looked bewildered again, "forgive me for asking you this very personal question. Did you lose your Mother recently?"

And before Nirmala could answer, Miss Hasan's head had dropped into her hands and though no sound escaped her, it was evident that she was deeply upset. The class held its breath. But somewhere in the room was a girl who had understood. A common loss had drawn Nirmala and Miss Hasan together. Strange that a loss could make up for the years and differences between. Possibly too, for that day, the girls did not notice Miss Hasan's innumerable deficiencies.



He did not seem to be aware of the noise in the bazaar,

The Young Visitor

Ruskin Bond

I WAS at my desk, gazing out of the window over the tops of trees, when somebody called out from below.

"Does anyone live up there?"

"No," I replied. "No one lives here."

"Then I'm coming up," said the voice below.

I heard footsteps, and a little later a boy stood in the open doorway, grinning at me. He was tall but rather too thin. He wore a white shirt, white pyjamas, and the elegant leather slippers that are common to northern India. A tray hung from his shoulders, filled with an odd assortment of goods.

"Would you like to buy something?" he asked.

In his tray were combs, buttons, soap, reels of thread, shoe-laces, and cheap perfumes. I felt that I ought to buy something, now that the boy had come all the way up my twenty-one steps. I didn't need a comb, but I bought one for ten paise.

He looked me over for signs of wear and tear.

"You need shoe-laces," he said.

"No I don't," I said.

He bent down, tested his fingers on one of my laces, and snapped it into two.

"Very poor quality," he said. "See how easily it breaks? Now you need laces!"

A few days later I was taking an evening walk in the bazaar when I noticed a boy sitting on the pavement, reading a book in the light of a street-lamp. He did not seem to be aware of

the noise in the bazaar. As I came nearer, I recognised him as the same boy who had visited my room.

I passed by, and it was only after I had gone some way down the road that I realised how silly it was of me not to have greeted him. I turned and retraced my steps. But when I came to the lamp-post. I found that the boy had gone.

He called on me again after a few days, and, after persuading me to buy a cheap fountain-pen, showed a willingness to talk about himself.

"I saw you reading one night," I said. "Do you go to school?"

"In the evenings," he said. "I am sitting for my High School examination next month. I can only attend night classes. If I pass the exams....."

He was silent, thinking about the things he could do if he passed. He could go to college, become a doctor or an engineer or a scientist, and there would be no more selling of combs and buttons and perfumes at street corners. He was an orphan, and he had been studying and supporting himself since the age of ten. His name was Suraj.

"Where do you stay?" I asked.

"Anywhere. In someone's verandah, or in the park, it doesn't matter much in the summer. During the winter, people are kind and give me places to sleep."

Occasionally I met Suraj in the bazaar. As his classes were held late in the evening, he was free during the day to carry on his small retail business. Sometimes he covered the residential areas of the town, where his customers ranged from the wives of officials and businessmen to gardeners and labourers.

One morning, when I opened the door of my room, I found Suraj asleep at the top of the steps. His tray lay a short distance away. I shook him gently, and he woke up immediately, blinking in the bright sunlight.

“Why didn’t you come in?” I asked. “Why didn’t you let me know you were here?”

“It was late at night when I came,” he said. “I didn’t want to disturb you.”

His examinations were nearing and he was working hard. He had to work harder than most others because, in the first place, he had very little time in which to study and, secondly, he had begun his education only three or four years previously, whereas the others, most of whom went to regular schools, had been attending classes since the age of six or seven.

Well, for ten days Suraj put aside his tray of merchandise and went to the examination centre. He did his papers with confidence and, as far as I could tell from the discussions we had, he did them quite well.

When it was all over, he took up his tray again and went about his business.

On the day the results were to be published, I rose early and walked to the news agency. It was six o’clock and the papers had just arrived. I went down the columns referring to our district, but I couldn’t find Suraj’s roll-number on the list of successful candidates.

I felt very disappointed and did not want to face Suraj. But, when I returned to my room, I found him sitting at the top of the steps. I didn’t have to tell him the bad news. He knew about it already.

I sat down beside him and we did not speak for some time.

“Never mind,” he said, realising that it was I who needed some comfort. “I’ll get through next year.”

“If only you’d had more time,” I said.

“I have plenty of time now,” he said confidently. “Another year!”

He smiled and stood up, the tray hanging from his shoulders.

“What would you like to buy?” he asked.